

Conjugal compatibility leads to a happy family life : A study of "Pride and Prejudice", "Sense and Sensibility" and "Mansfield Park"

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Abstract : Dealing with the problems of domestic life in all her novels, Jane Austen assigns certain duties to every member of the family and believe that if they all realize their responsibilities, there will be no clash. Staunchly wedded to the principle of harmonious relation-ship between husband and wife, she considers their ability to achieve perfect adjustment, an essential pre-requisite to stable family life. It is precisely because of this that she stresses in one novel after another the sanctity of married life.

IndexTerms - Domestic, duties, responsibilities, harmonious, adjustment, stable, life.

I. INTRODUCTION

In *Sense and Sensibility* we meet two couples, the Dashwoods and the Middletons. John Dashwood is left to take care of his brother's widow and her children. His real character, slightly disguised by a superficial good nature, is made up of avarice, selfishness, and subservience to his wife. Mr. Dashwood's first proposal was to give a thousands pounds to each of his sisters. But Mrs. John Dashwood's idea of her duty to her husband's widowed step-mother and to her daughters was not as liberal as that of her husband. The conversation between the two is so true to human nature that it must be quoted 'it was my father's last request to me that I should assist his widow and daughters'. 'He did not know what he was talking of, I dare say; ten to one but he was light-headed at the time. Had he been in his right senses he would not have thought of such a thing as begging you give away half your fortune from your own child.

'He did not stipulate for any particular sum, my dear Fanny; he only requested me, in general terms, to assist them, and make their situation more comfortable than it was in his power to do.... But as he required the promise, I could not do less than give it; at least I thought so at the time. The promise, therefore, was given, and must be performed, something must be done for them whenever they leave Norland and settle in a new home. 'Well, let something be done for them; but that something need not be three thousand pounds'.....

'Perhaps, then, it would be better for all parties if the sum were diminished one-half.... They can hardly expect more.'

'There is no knowing what they may expect' said the lady; 'but we not to think of their expectations; the question is, what can you afford to do.?'

'Certainly; and I think I may afford to give them five hundred pounds a-piece. As it is, without any addition of mine, they will each have above three thousand pounds on their mother's death; a very comfortable fortune for any young woman.'[1]

Once the understanding reached, the descent is repaid. The five hundred pounds become an annuity, the annuity a present of fifty pounds now and then, the fifty pounds no money at all but such assistance as might be reasonable expected.

..... looking out for a comfortable small house for them, helping them to move their things, and sending them presents of fish and game and so forth, whenever they are in season...[2]

Mrs. Dashwood is highly selfish and she does not wish to let her sisters-in-law get any money whatsoever from her husband. She convinces him that it won't be necessary for him to do so in order to have them comfortably settled. An occasional gift would be more welcome and better appreciated.

'Do but consider, my dear Mr. Dashwood, how excessively comfortable your mother-in-law (step-mother) her daughters may live on the interest of seven thousand pounds, besides the thousand pounds belonging to each of the girls, which brings them in fifty pounds a year a-piece, and of course, they will pay their mother for their board out of it. Altogether, they will have five hundred a year amongst them, and what on earth can four women want for more than that?'[3]

From the above speech we know how petty-minded Mrs. Dashwood could be. She resented a single penny given to her sister-in-law. Not that they could not afford to spare some money for the sisters, but she was too miserly to part with the fortune which was to be her child's. She is a woman without any feelings of love and affection. Nowhere in the novel do we get the impression of her being in love even with her husband. All she cares for is money. We find her to be a scheming female who uses all her wiles to assure Mr. John Dashwood, her husband, how useless it would be to give any money to his sisters when they won't be in a position to utilize it.[4]

Mr. John Dashwood is the typical hen-pecked husband. He won't or cannot do anything against his wife's wishes. In fact, he himself is a selfish man who esteems people's worth only by the amount of money they possess. No wonder then that we find him encouraging Elinor to entice Colonel Brandon into marrying her as he was a very rich and influential man. John Dashwood cares nothing for human feelings and is not the least touched by the sufferings of even his own relatives.

On the whole, Mr. & Mrs. John Dashwood are a model of a selfish couple conceited enough to think themselves generous in spite of being so miserly.

Another couple in Sense and sensibility is an aged one sir John Middleton, an empty-headed hospitable sportsman and his wife, equally empty-headed but selfish where he was generous and cold where he was warm.

He was a blessing to all the Juvenile part of the neighbourhood, for in summer he was forever forming parties to eat cold ham and chicken out of doors, and in winter his private balls were numerous enough for any young lady who was not suffering under the insatiable appetite of fifteen.[5]

Sir John Middleton is very kind though terribly outspoken. He genuinely cares for the young people and enjoys their company. He arranges outings and parties for the neighbourhood and is happiest in huge gatherings. At the same time he is an incurable gossip and nothing can remain a secret with him for long. He loves having guests and is delighted to have discovered a cousinship with Lucy Steele and her elder sister Anne. The girls are invited to stay Barton Park. Elinor and Marianne have some seen enough of them. But the Miss Steeles.... came from Exeter well provided with admiration for the use of sir John Middleton, his family and all his relations, and no niggardly portion was now dealt out to his fair cousins, whom they declared to be the most beautiful, elegant, accomplished and agreeable girls they had ever beheld, and with whom they were particularly anxious to be better acquainted.[6]

Sir John Middleton soon communicated to his new friends the supposed state of Miss Dashwood's affections. Jokes were openly made about them. Here we cannot help but think that baronets of those days seem to have been strangely ill-bred. Otherwise, sir emiddleton is a kind-hearted man and good company compared to his selfish and cold wife.

And then, In pride and Prejudice we meet Mr. and Mrs. Bennet. Their marriage is ddisastrous that it almost ruins the lives and prospects of all their children. Mr. Bennet, impressed by her youth and beauty, was attracted towards Mrs. Bennet and married her, but he soon realized how silly and shallow she was. Any affection that he must have had for his wife soon disappeared and he took refuge from reality in books and witticism. He regarded his wife no more than a source of merriment.

Incompatibility leads to irresponsibility; Mrs. Bennet is always silly and irresponsible. Mr. Bennet finds an escape from this unpleasant reality in his library, and even the shock of Lydia's behavior does not change him. At the moment when he does seem shaken out of his lethargy, but no sooner is the matter settled with no assistances needed from him, he goes back to his old routine and lethargy. Surprisingly enough, he even seems content with his life.

Elizabeth, Mr. Bennet's favourite child, always tries to make him see sense, realize his responsibilities and control the erratic and wayward behavior of his younger daughters, particularly Lydia. But he fails to take the advice and the result is Lydia's elopement.

But Mr. Bennet is essentially a kind-hearted, loving and intelligent man. He loves his children and gives them full freedom to do whatever might please them. When unable to change his wife, he tries to adjust to her way of living and makes a den for himself in the house the library. We find him surrounded with books all through the novel. He lives in a world of his own. Oblivious to the affairs of the house mostly, he does offer a piece of advice here and there. It is Mrs. Bennet who is generally seen ruling the house with all her silly notions of living and makes a den for himself in the house the library. We find him surrounded with books all through the novel. He lives in a world of his own. Oblivious to the affairs of the house mostly, he does offer a piece of advice here and here. It is Mrs. Bennet who is generally seen ruling the house with all her silly notions.

Her one aim in life was to see her daughters well married. She is, in fact, seen encouraging them to entice eligible bachelors into marriage. Any other woman except Mrs. Bennet would be furious at Lydia for running away with Wickham, but Mrs. Bennet is so thrilled to have a daughter married at such a young age that it hardly matters to her how and under what circumstances the alliance came about. Mrs. Bennet is so anxious to see her girls settled that she is delighted when Mr. Collins asks for Elizabeth's hand in marriage. She cannot think of Collins being unsuitable when he has a fortune behind him. No wonder then that she is furious with Elizabeth for refusing him. She asks Mrs. Bennet to make Elizabeth see sense, to cold her into compliance.

"come here, child", cried her father as she appeared. "I have sent for you on an affair of importance. I understand that Mr. Collins has made you an offer of marriage. Is it true. Elizabeth replied that it was. "Very well-and this offer of marriage you have refused." "I have, sir".

"very well. We how come to the point. Your mother insists upon your accepting it. It is not so, Mrs. Bennet." "Yes, or I will never see her again". An unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you do." [7]

No parent was ever quite so foolish as Mrs. Bennet, nor so passionless as Mr. Bennet. Mr. Collins, thus disposed of, does not proceed any further down the list of the Bennet daughters but without delay asks and obtains the hand of Charlotte Lucas, daughter of a prosperous tradesman.

Mr. Bennet advises Elizabeth once again when he hears that she wishes to marry Darcy, believing that she hated him. "My child, let me not have the grief of seeing you unable to respect your partner in life. You know not that you are about." [8]

Here we are sure that he realizes his mistakes in the choice of his own partner in life and is therefore advising his daughter against making a wrong choice.

Mrs. Bennet, too, remains as silly as every. When thinks that Darcy is making it awkward for Jane and Bingley by his presence, she unwittingly requests Elizabeth to keep the terrible, insufferable man occupied. Little did she know then that he was soon to rise in her esteem. As soon as she hears of Elizabeth's engagement with Darcy being finalized, she cannot stop saying how lucky Elizabeth was in getting such a fine man for a husband. Obviously she is blinded by money and position and that is all she cares about.

We find her to be a strange sort of a mother, who is more bothered about Lydia not having any proper clothes for her wedding than about the fact that she had been living with Wickham for a fortnight before marriage.

She pampers her daughters and instead of curbing their spirits for adventure and romance, encourages them a bait rich, eligible men into marriage.

Of the marriages made by Jane, Elizabeth and Lydia, little need be said. Lydia was like her mother, waiting eagerly for the first opportunity to marry, especially a smart officer in uniform. She fancies herself in love with Wickham and runs away with him, hoping that he would marry her as soon as they reached Scotland. Least does she suspect that he has no plans to marry her. She just thought how exciting it would be to be married before any of her elder sisters did not her ambition was to chaperon them to balls and parties. She remains as silly and irresponsible as her mother even after a settlement is brought about by Mr. Darcy as a result of which she and Wickham are married.

Elizabeth lacks Jane's 'candour', serenity and submissiveness; she has charm and wit. It is good that her conflict with Darcy was thoroughly resolved before marriage and we find them leading a very happy and satisfying married life.

Charlotte Lucas displays the opportunism of a spinster who believed that marriage, 'however uncertain of giving happiness', was her 'pleasantest preservative from want'. The entail on Longbourn ensured the latter.

A woman is not usually disposed to like the wife of the man whom she has rejected, still less if he is plainly unworthy and more so. She has been an intimate friend. The friendship must suffer a decline of warmth. [9]

'Were I persuaded that Charlotte had and regard for him, I should only think worse of her understanding than I now do of her heart', says Elizabeth to Jane, but she is not irreconcilable, and after some hesitation accepts an invitation from the Collinses to stay with them at Hunsford Parsonage.

Through Elizabeth we observe that the Collinses' way of life. Charlotte has certainly gained material security but she suffers as her husband's understanding is never equal to hers. He is a fool and remains that way. Charlotte has to be content with managing her house as she pleased.

Let's now move on to Mansfield Park to observe yet another husband and wife—Sir Thomas Bertram and Lady Bertram. Sir Thomas Bertram is a remote and dignified head of the house whereas Lady Bertram is a nonentity. Sir Thomas is a conscientious father to his children and sees to their education himself. He is all that the head of a family should be. Amid the cares and complacency of his own family, he did not forget his poor relatives. He was generous with the children of his wife's sister, Mrs. Price. An evidence of his generous nature is provided by his act of adopting Mrs. Price's daughter Fanny, to whom he is as kind as to his own children.

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But we see him fail as a father, Sir Thomas is intelligent enough to realize that his handling of his children has been defective in that they curbed their spirits in his presence and felt relieved and free in his absence. The father, of course, fails with his children. But the indolent mother is no less responsible for things going wrong with them. In the very beginning of the novel, Jane Austen tells us.

To the education of her daughters Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa doing some long piece of needle-work, of little use and no beauty; thinking more of her pug than her children, but very indulgent to the latter, when it did not put herself to inconvenience; guided in everything important by Sir Thomas, and in smaller concerns by her sister. Had she possessed greater leisure for the service of her girls, she would probably have supposed it unnecessary; for they were under the care of a governess, with proper masters, and could want nothing more. [10]

During the absence of her husband from Mansfield, Lady Bertram is not able to discharge her duties and responsibilities as the guardian of the children. On the other hand, she becomes just a chipper as Mrs. Grant very aptly describes her to Mary Crawford.

II. CONCLUSION

One thing can be safely said of Jane Austen's couples that they are all generally ill-matched. We cannot help thinking how different had the story been if Mrs. Bennet was a little sensible or Mr. Bennet slightly more interested in his domestic responsibilities. It would certainly have been a better world in Mansfield had Lady Bertram been more loving and responsible towards her household and tried to correct the repressive ways of her husband vis-à-vis the children.

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3. Ibid., pp. 14
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5. Ibid., pp. 26
6. Ibid., pp. 78
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8. Ibid., pp. 438
9. Ibid., pp. 302
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